

In the Midst of Disaster – God:  
An Unexpected Trip  
Luke 2:1-5

For the Sundays in Advent – the next 4 Sundays – we’re going to look at the Christmas story. We’re going to look at it with a different eye than the one we usually use. I’ve always found it instructive in reading the Scriptures to try to project myself into the story and try to imagine what it would have been like to experience that moment and that event. For the next 4 Sundays we’re going to be looking at the story of Jesus’ birth with a somewhat cynical eye. The title of this series is “In the Midst of Disaster – God”, and I think that by the time we’ve made our way through this month of Sundays, you’ll agree with me that, in some respects, for the people involved, especially Mary and Joseph, the wonderful story of the birth of the Savior, had the makings, as it unfolded, of a disaster. But, just as much, it taught them that in any moment of life that appears disastrous, you will find God at work in your behalf. So today, “An Unexpected Trip.”

These opening verses of Luke’s second chapter set the stage for what the theologians call “The Birth Narrative,” the story of God’s coming among us in the person of the Baby Jesus. It is a remarkable story full of wonder and imagery, and I would bet that it holds a special place in the hearts of all of us. It may, in fact, be the first such story of wonder that we ever heard. A starlight

birth, in a stable; an angel choir singing to shepherds; a poor couple being chosen for work of great honor – it has everything.

But imagine, if you will, that you are Mary and Joseph. If we roll the scene back a bit further we find them, perhaps, having a difficult few months before this. Mary is a young, newlywed, suspiciously pregnant in a very short time in a town that probably loved gossip as much as any small town. I can't imagine what the conversations were like in their home around the dinner table. I know when Bonnie and I were expecting a child, the impending birth we spent a great deal of time talking about and preparing for it. And, although our kids are wonderful, not a one of them was God.

But things go fairly well, despite the inevitable speculation of the neighbors, and they are nearing the time for the birth. I would imagine Joseph, being a man who worked with his hands, had a hand-made cradle all ready for the baby in a corner of their one-room home. And I'm sure Mary had some clothes ready for the newborn son. They didn't have to make any decisions about a name; the angel had already told Joseph he was to name Him Jesus.

And suddenly, an announcement is made that Caesar Augustus, emperor of the Roman Empire, has decreed that a

census be taken of his entire empire, and, that everyone must report to be counted to their ancestral hometown.

Disaster! Mary is perilously close to the end of her pregnancy. Infant mortality rates are high in the ancient world. Birth, while a cause for great joy, is also a cause for great concern. Babies are born at home, without benefit of medical professionals, with the assistance of other women. They have done everything they could do to make their home ready for the birth and for the baby. Now they must make a long trip of 80-90 miles to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, for he was a descendant of King David.

Can you imagine what went through Mary's mind? The fear for her unborn child? Can you imagine what Joseph must have been thinking? He has been charged with caring for Mary and the baby, the Son of God, and he's done his best and now it seems as if it was for nothing and Mary and the baby are in jeopardy, and he's responsible.

Not to mention – and, guys, we really won't empathize with this – but not to mention Mary's thoughts about an 80-90 mile ride on a donkey, 8 ½ months pregnant – and no Rest Areas on this highway!

I have no reason to believe that Mary and Joseph were not like any of us. I have no trouble believing that their minds, as ours would, went immediately to panic mode. This is a disaster! All their careful planning; all the care they've taken so far; the arrangements they've made – all for nothing. And a difficult and potentially dangerous trip ahead of them, as well.

Remember, this was no “hop in the car and tool down the interstate” journey. The Roman roads were the best in the world, but they were still dangerous to the point that people would band together for support and protection to make long trips. The best you could hope to do per day was perhaps 15 miles, so it's 5-6 days on the road. Hard as it is to conceive, there were no McDonald's or Wendy's on the way.

And what would they do when they got there? Tiny Bethlehem would be inundated with travelers. All the male descendants of King David would be headed there.

If there were not a few moments of panic on the part of Joseph and Mary in the first days after the announcement of the census, I would be pretty surprised. I'm sure they experienced all the fears and emotions that anyone experiences who receives bad news, whether it's news of a death, or a natural disaster, or a complete disruption of plans. – emotions of fear, uncertainty, anger – dare I say it? I wouldn't be at all surprised if Joseph didn't

wonder about where God was in all this. After all, hadn't they been given a mission, and wasn't the mission from God and for God, and doesn't that imply that He would be running interference for them, clearing the way, making things easy? And then might come anger, yes, even anger at God.

But they have no choice. This isn't an "if it's convenient for you" situation. They have to go or face the wrath of the Roman army. So, they set off for Bethlehem.

And here I think we can make another assumption, this one of a more positive nature. Because of the way the Scripture describes Mary and Joseph, and because Luke and Matthew show us how they have reacted to the life-altering news that they are going to be the guardians of the Messiah, I think it's almost a certainty that they set out in faith.

A difficult trip, an unexpected journey, a dangerous road, a dangerous situation with a late-term pregnancy, an especially cargo, an uncertain situation at the end of the journey, but they set out anyway. As you know, as Lutherans we neither worship nor pray to Mary or Joseph, but we readily agree that these were two remarkably faithful, trusting people.

And, as we know, with the marvelous benefit of 2000 years of hindsight, it all works out. God works it out – it all works out

according to the plan He established before the creation of the world to bring His Son into the world as one of us. And it works out in such a way that it gives us a much more marvelous and wondrous story than if Jesus had been born in Mary and Joseph's home in Nazareth.

Did Mary and Joseph have a sense that they were walking a road – literally and figuratively – that God had mapped out for them long, long before, or, did they wonder if maybe God had turned His attention and missed what was happening on earth for a bit? We don't know. They left no diaries of the journey. But it would not be hard to think of them thinking that.

But, in faith, they kept putting one foot in front of the other, day after day, all the way to Bethlehem, each step a step of faith that God would take care of them and their precious passenger.

God has called each of us to a journey, the journey of our lives. Ours almost certainly are not as momentous as the one He called Joseph and Mary to take. But they are our journeys. He promises that He will always be with us, that He will never leave us nor forsake us, and everything will work out for good to those who love and trust Him. Just as it did for Mary and Joseph and Jesus.

But in the midst of disaster: when our home catches fire;

when a loved one dies unexpectedly; when we get a diagnosis we never saw coming; when a child seems lost; when our life appears to be spiraling out of control, it's very easy to wonder if God is still paying attention, or to wonder if He ever was. Because, after all, I'm not Joseph, I'm not Mary. I'm just me, one of 6 + billion people on the planet. Why should He care about me and my life? How could He possibly care about all of our lives?

One of the many lessons of the Birth Narrative is that He does. He does know each of us; He does care about each of us. And He is faithful to His promise to each of us that He will never leave us nor forsake us, He will be with us always, and all things will work together for good for those who love and trust Him.

The promise is for now and for eternity. All who believe in that Bethlehem-born Savior will spend forever with Him. It's a free gift to all who believe in Him. He came to die to pay for our sins and to rise victorious over death and sin. And He invites us into the rooms He has prepared for all who believe it.

It's a natural response in the midst of disaster to go the worst possible scenario mode. But for Christians we have more. For believers in Jesus, we can move past that and start looking in the midst of disaster for God. He will be there, working things together for good, bringing good out of it for those who trust in Him. Remember Joseph and Mary, trekking off for Bethlehem

into an unknown future. The only thing they trusted in was that in the midst of their disaster would be God.